

3rd Sunday after Easter, April 10, 2016 - Baptisms of Owen & Ian, Gym Open House
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 21:1 – 19

Failure

The gospel is a story of failure, on so many levels. There's the part about fishing—so many fishing stories are stories of failure, “the one that got away.” So also the gospel is a story of failure. First of all that the disciples even go fishing. The disciples have seen the resurrected Jesus appear several times, they've received the Holy Spirit, they've been authorized to forgive sins, they've been told that as Jesus was sent by God so they are sent! And what do they do? They go fishing. You expect “Hooray!” and you get “ho hum.” It's Easter, disciples, can't I get an “Alleluia?” It's even told in a ho hum way. Peter says, “I'm going fishing.” The disciples respond, “We will go too.” For all that they are getting into a boat, it seems a failure to launch, a failure of nerve, a failure of imagination. After witnessing resurrection and receiving a commission they react by going fishing. Now, one of our baptismal parents happens to run a commercial fishing business; he may find more to approve here. But there is that wry observation about fishing and failure: it's called “fishing,” not “catching.” And indeed, the disciples are out all night, and they don't catch anything (at first). On their own they come up with nothing, not even a story about the one they didn't catch.

Fast forward to the conversation between Peter and Jesus, another part of a story of failure. Again, note the way it's told. Not so much “ho-hum,” as oddly repetitive. The disciples and Jesus have just shared a meal. Jesus took bread and gave it to them. Being Jesus, I'm betting that he first gave thanks, and then broke the bread, and then gave it to all of them. Then after the meal, there's these repetitive questions for Peter, who is standing near a charcoal fire. Remember all night he had been in the boat, but then, at dawn, when they spotted Jesus on the shore, Peter puts on his clothes (an odd decision in light of what he's about to do) and jumps out of the boat and swims to shore. Standing there in dripping clothing, Peter was probably getting cold, so he stands by the charcoal fire, warming himself, and he's questioned, repeatedly. Peter feels defensive, annoyed, hurt, these questions keep coming—three times. Three times, Peter!

You see the references, the allusions, the point of the repetitions? Peter doesn't. How does Peter not remember the last time he was questioned three times while warming himself by a charcoal fire? When he was cold, confused, when he was at his worst, when it was the night he denied that he was a disciple of Jesus, denied it three times. A gospel of failure.

I don't know about you, but I don't like failure. I don't like it when I fail people I work with, people I care about. I think about who I am, my life, this work, and I don't want to be a failure. I don't know about you, but I have a hunch that you don't like failure, either. Who announces, “I am going to fail,”? If someone would, the response isn't usually: “We will fail with you.” Failure is unappealing. Failure is embarrassing. Failure is distasteful, repugnant, abhorrent, and undoubtedly un-American. The dislike, the fear of failure is so embedded in us that we do two things with it. The disciples do these two things, too. In the face of failure, the disciples—and we—1) Work more and 2) Don't talk about it.

Work more. Exert additional effort. We hear that everywhere, don't we? Try harder. Particularly as a way to ward off failure. “If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.” The disciples do that, in today's gospel story, they stay out all night, not catching. Sadly, sometimes this story is interpreted to say we should just try harder, throw the nets over one more time.

Lutherans of all people should be wary of this reading—as if it was just a little more effort that led to bursting nets. Now clearly the disciples were hard workers, and this is to be commended. Don't hear me saying that that hard work is not necessary. But there's a crucial detail about what made the work fruitful: who directs it. "It is the Lord!" says the disciple whom Jesus loved. (You know it's important whenever you hear John's gospel mentions "the disciple whom Jesus loved.") And of course it's important. It is the Lord! It's essential—but so often we neglect it. Jesus directs the fishing. Jesus says, "Yes, try again—but try it from the right side of the boat." How different can the sea be on the right side of the boat? But it is! Right there, right where they are, it's teeming with fish. To experience that, they need to listen to Jesus, who was calling them to fish, not in a different lake, but in a different way, right where they are. We could do this, too. We could have a conversation with a person who lives to our right, or a person at a desk to our right, or a person who is sitting, just to our right. Jesus says, they're right there. Jesus is calling us to fish for them. Jesus is calling us, after long, dark nights, to experience the abundance that is right beside us. Jesus does not say, "Try harder," but "Follow me."

Which is hard. Because we fail. All the time. On so many levels. We don't like to talk about it—that's the second thing we often do with failure: we deny it. We don't like to say it, but we fail. We are lousy followers of Jesus. Like Peter, who denied Jesus, then denied that he denied him. Peter is still so much in denial that he doesn't get that that's what Jesus is getting at, alluding to, acknowledging, here on the shore. I have a hunch you know about this aspect of failure, too, about not talking about it. Something happens, we do something, or something is done to us, something happens about which we are embarrassed, or something that makes us feel repugnant, and it becomes something we don't talk about, becomes a story that doesn't get told.

The Bible tells these stories. The gospel is all about failure. Jesus intentionally focuses on failure in today's gospel in various ways: Did you note how he calls to the disciples from the shore: "Children, you have no fish, have you?" And then questioning Peter, repeatedly, which is to say, telling Peter, repeatedly "We can talk about it. I love you so much that we can talk about what happened." Jesus' questions are repetitive because they are a litany. They are what we do here in church, the repetition of sacramental practices, of holy communion, of baptism. These litanies give Peter, give disciples, give us, a way to talk about failure—and a way to accept a love that is oceans greater than our failure, a love that is blazingly brighter than any and all of our darkest nights, a love that will warm our cold hearts.

We fail. In Jesus, we are not failures. In Jesus, in the cross, God takes what looks like failure—what is more abhorrent than painful, public execution?—in Jesus God takes what looks like failure, and then God appears at daybreak. The Son rises. God appears, again and again, calling us to follow him—follow him into a new and never-ending dawn.